



Northumbria University historian Dr Jennifer Aston

Mar 26, 2024 13:45 GMT

History of divorce explored in new research project

A Northumbria University historian is to explore the impact of changes in divorce legislation during the Victorian era – specifically on women and children.

In 1857 a new Act of Parliament was introduced in the UK which revolutionised the process through which divorce was granted and paved the way for positive reform to the family law system.

The Matrimonial Causes Act saw jurisdiction for the divorce process move from the church to the civil courts, making divorce, theoretically at least, an option for all rather than just the very wealthy.

Despite the monumental impact the Act had on families across the UK, there has been little research into the individual stories of families going through the divorce process in the years following its introduction.

[Dr Jennifer Aston](#), of Northumbria University's [Department of Humanities](#), has been awarded over £200,000 by the Economic and Social Research Council ([ESRC](#)) for a project exploring the history of divorce between 1858 and 1923.

Over the next two years Dr Aston will work with the [Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service \(Cafcass\)](#), the charity [Women's Aid](#), and [The National Archives](#) to create a fuller picture of the impact of the Act.

In particular, she will be exploring the issue of domestic abuse, the origins of child custody and mediation, the cost of divorce, and the development of the family law sector during this period.

One of the major outcomes of the project will be a new database, designed in collaboration with the Institute of Historical Research in London, which will include not only statistical data gathered from court records, but also more personal details about the individuals whose names feature in the records.

This would include the petitioners but also their children and the solicitors and barristers involved.

Speaking about the research, Dr Aston said: "The changes in the law around divorce in 1857 had a profound effect on the family law sector more widely and much of the legislation and processes used in the family courts today can be traced back to this period.

"I'm interested in finding out more about the people behind the statistics and what their stories can tell us about the true impact of the Matrimonial Causes Act on Victorian families and society more generally."

Dr Aston will first carry out a broad collection of statistical data around divorce in the 65 years following the introduction of the act, using court

records.

She will then delve deeper into individual case studies, using newspapers, probate documents, school registers, private diaries, autobiographies, and photos to identify any notable case studies or examples of personal stories which could shed light on the wider impact of the divorce act.

Dr Aston and recently appointed Senior Research Assistant Dr Diane Ranyard will work with the project partners to inform twenty-first century policy campaigns as well as working with The National Archives to amplify the exciting information contained within the divorce petitions.

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